

FEASTING ON CULTURES TO SOLVE OUR
PROBLEMS AND ENRICH OUR LIVES

BY D. Paul Schafer



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I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.

Mahatma Gandhi

I had the good fortune to be born in Toronto and spend the bulk of my life there. I say "good fortune" because I have been drawing on all the diverse cultures of this remarkable city to enhance my life for more than half a century.

When I went to public school, I discovered that most of the kids at the school were also born in Toronto and had European roots like myself. Some had Scottish, Irish, and German roots, much as I did. Others had Italian, Greek, or Ukrainian roots. And a few had Czechoslovakian, Yugoslavian, Romanian, or Jewish roots. We quickly learned not to talk about our ethnic origins because this caused tensions that interfered with our natural desire to play together and have a good time together.

Being born to parents who had European roots had its advantages. Consistent with the values and traditions of most European cultures and countries, my parents were anxious to see that I got a quality

education and a solid grounding in the arts. So they sent me to the Art Gallery of Toronto for art lessons, paid for private piano and singing lessons, and enrolled me in a church choir. While I didn't realize it at the time, I was drawing on other cultures and their well-established commitment to the arts to broaden my horizons and enrich my life.

When I went to high school, most of the students I hung around with were Jewish. This was because there were many more Jewish students at the high school I attended than at public school, and they seemed to be interested in the same things I was interested in. It was a good thing they were Jewish, since they dragged me along to university with them as a result of their keen desire to get an advanced education and university degree. Had it not been for this, I probably would not have gone to university at all, since I did very poorly at high school in the academic sense. Here again, I was drawing on another culture - in this case Jewish culture and its well-known reverence for education and learning - to improve my situation and bring about a fundamental change in my life. It is a change that has made it possible for me to reap numerous rewards ever since.

There were many other rewards to be reaped from my association with Jewish students at high school. One was going to the YMHA - the Young Men's Hebrew Association - at the corner of Bloor Street and Spadina Avenue to play basketball. Another was playing billiards on Brunswick Avenue. And a third was going out to eat after our basketball games at the Mars Restaurant on College Street, the Crescent Grill on Spadina Avenue, and other restaurants in the central part of the city.

It was also through my friends at the "Y" that I got my first taste of Chinese food. While my father had taken us to Studley's for years - a Victorian restaurant on King Street famous for its roast beef, buffets, and mile-high mince meat pie - this was the extent of my exposure to food from other cultures until my friends at the Y took me to Number 12A, a small Chinese restaurant above a store on Elizabeth Street in an area of the city known as "Chinatown."

I will never forget my first Chinese meal. It consisted of won ton soup, barbecued pork spare ribs, shrimp fried rice, beef chow mein, sweet and sour chicken balls, and fortune cookies. I remember thinking "what have I been missing all these years!" Anyone who has grown up on food from the British Isles will know exactly what I mean, since most of our meals consisted of meat, potatoes, and a vegetable. My mouth still waters when I think about my first Chinese meal. I can taste it today like it was yesterday.

Chinese food has been an integral part of my life ever since. For years, I went to the Sai Woo restaurant on Dundas near Bay. It was extremely popular with many Torontonians because its founder - Bill Wen - knew how to throw a banquet and was renowned in the city for helping Chinese immigrants and participating in the creation of a home for the aged in downtown Toronto. Like many residents of the city, I can still recall his superb banquets with their scrumptious dishes, impeccable service, excellent organization, centuries old

eggs, and colourful decorations. It is probably the closest I will ever come to knowing what it was like to eat at the court of Kublai Khan and many other Chinese emperors.

Like residents and visitors alike, I have been enjoying the cuisines of the many different cultures that exist in Toronto ever since I had my first Chinese meal. Unlike Chinese cuisine, which has been available in Toronto for a long time, most of the cuisines of other cultures are more recent. For example, I was one of the first residents of the city to experience Indian food and “hot cuisine” when the Rajput restaurant opened its doors on Bloor near Bathurst in the nineteen sixties, with its pungent curries, birianis, pakoras, and other delicacies.

And while we are on Bloor Street, what about the Country Style restaurant? It opened its doors after the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 and served some of the best home-cooked Hungarian dishes I have ever tasted, which is saying something because my parents took in a Hungarian refugee after the revolution and he cooked many terrific Hungarian meals for us. However, he couldn't match the Country Style for its cauliflower soup, humongous wiener schnitzels, chicken paprikas, cherry strudel, and quaint cooks in high-laced boots.

For many years, several Italian restaurants on Saint Clair Avenue near Dufferin and College Street near Euclid were favourites, as was the Balkans restaurant on Elm Street. In fact, this particular restaurant - with its stoic owner in maroon fez - was my favourite restaurant in Toronto. It specialized in Yugoslavian cuisine, and its “Balkan dinner” of Serbian bean soup, breaded mushrooms with tartar sauce, cevapcici, rajnici, and backlava was to die for as they say. It was the perfect introduction to the entire Balkans region that I visited many times in the years to follow to enjoy its rich cultures and traditions. I regret the day the Balkans restaurant closed in Toronto more than any other change that has taken place in the city since that time. It moved to Mount Pleasant Avenue in uptown Toronto for a time after it left its location on Elm Street in downtown Toronto, but it was never the same. It seldom is.

The list certainly does not end here. For many years, I enjoyed a Turkish restaurant on Dundas Street West and a Japanese restaurant in Don Mills that never failed to excite. And more recently, I have enjoyed Thai cuisine in the many Thai restaurants that have opened up in Toronto in recent years. I remember thinking when I had my first taste of Thai food in Bangkok on my way to New Zealand to undertake a UNESCO mission that it was too bad Torontonians did not know a great deal more about Thai cuisine because I thought it was one of the finest cuisines in the world. It seemed to incorporate the best of Indian and Chinese cooking, with a bit of tropical excitement and a great deal of artistry thrown in for good measure. So it is not without a certain sense of satisfaction that I witness the current love affair that is going on between Torontonians and Thai cuisine.

I could go on, but the point has been made. Our lives are incredibly enriched by our ability to tap into other cultures through their cuisines. While this is only a small part of these cultures, it is a very important part because most of us are exposed to other cultures through their cuisines before anything else.

Whether it is Brazilian culture, Belgian culture, Indonesian culture, or any other culture, the satisfaction that comes from the cuisines of the various cultures of the world brings joy and happiness into our lives like probably nothing else. I know people who no longer ask if you would like to eat fish, chicken, or steak for dinner, but rather whether you would like to eat "Indian," Moroccan," "French," "Italian," "South American," or "Caribbean."

Thelma Barer-Stein knows all about this. In her book, *You Eat What You Are: A Study of Ethnic Food Traditions*, she states, "Without food we cannot survive. But food is much more than a tool of survival. Food is a source of pleasure, comfort, security. Food is also a symbol of hospitality, social status, and has ritual significance. What we select to eat, how we prepare it, serve it, and even how we eat it, are all factors deeply touched by our individual cultural inheritance."

In many ways, food acts as a "gateway" to cultures because there is much to be learned about cultures through their cuisines. Take Chinese culture for example. Regardless of how many dynasties have existed in China, Chinese culture as a whole is based on the principle of yin and yang or the theory of opposites: male and female, light and dark; positive and negative, and so forth. Success in life come from how well people deal with these opposites and achieve balance, harmony, and synergy between them. It is not surprising, therefore, that Chinese cuisine is based on opposites as well - sweet and sour, hot and cold, spicy and mild, and the like - and how well these opposites are blended together to form a whole.

Japanese culture provides another illustration of this. It is a well-known fact that Japanese culture is concerned with "simplicity." The objective is to make things as simple as possible with the least amount of confusion. Japanese cuisine also exudes this concern, since the challenge is to create incredible gastronomic experiences with the least amount of complexity and complication. Hence the emphasis on dishes and meals that are aesthetically appealing, exquisitely served, scrumptious to eat, and very sophisticated.

Of course, food is not the only thing that acts as a gateway to cultures. The crafts do this too, and do it very well. Like the different cuisines of the world, the crafts enrich our lives, which is why most people are anxious to decorate their homes with craft objects from the different cultures of the world.

I discovered this many years ago when I was scouring Toronto looking for craft objects to beautify our home. I quickly learned that there are many areas of the city where exquisite craft objects from the different cultures of the world can be found. Roncesvalles Avenue, for example, was perfect for Polish crafts, particularly table runners and hand-carved wooden plates with scenes from the Tatras Mountains.

Bloor Street West, in an area known as "The Village," was ideal for Ukrainian crafts, especially pots, bowls, and tablecloths with incredible geometric shapes and colourful designs. College Street, between Bathurst and Spadina, was unbeatable for South American and Spanish crafts - everything from superb leatherwork and replicas of El Cid, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza to painted plates like the ones that grace the walls of Carman's Steak House on Alexander Street. And speaking of painted plates, are there any more beautiful than the ones that come from Turkey? They can occasionally be found in craft stores in Toronto if one is very lucky, with their incredible designs of flowers, plants, and trees.

And while it came a little later when people from the Middle East started showing up in Toronto in large numbers, what about Persian carpets? Is there anything more exquisite to warm a room or grace a wall than a carpet from Iran, Turkestan, or some other Middle Eastern country? The very names of the cities that have made these carpets rightly famous - Tabriz, Qum, Kashan, Bakhitiari, Shiraz, Kirman, Meshed, Bokhara, and the like - conjure up images of Arabian nights, religious motifs, and mythological themes. Does anything say more about the cultures of these countries and parts of the world than their carpets?

Not long after I started scouring the city looking for craft objects, I became aware of Toronto's greatest resource. I am speaking, of course, of its "ethnic neighbourhoods." Has anything done more to bring vitality, variety, colour, and character to the city?

At a time when Jane Jacobs was making the case that neighbourhoods play a crucial role in the lives of all cities, I was exploring Toronto's different ethnic neighbourhoods to see what I could uncover. These neighbourhoods held out a particular fascination for me because I could visit any part of the world without ever having to leave Toronto.

Whenever I felt the need to "get away" or "take a trip abroad" - which was often when I was working at the Ontario Arts Council and teaching at York University and the University of Toronto - I would take off for "Little Italy," "Little Portugal," "Little India," "Little Greece," "Chinatown," or some other exotic destination. I would spend a day in these places feeling like I was in a totally different part of the world: shopping in different shops; talking to people who had very different ethnic origins and backgrounds; and eating meals that were simply out of this world. I would then return to my own culture and part of the world feeling refreshed, revitalized, and renewed. And the best part of it all was that I didn't have to pay an arm and a leg to get there, endure endless traffic lines and tie-ups on the Don Valley Parkway and 401, be out at the airport three hours before flight departure, hassle with baggage clerks, and endure countless other inconveniences.

Of all my explorations in Toronto, my favourite one was walking the entire length of Bloor Street and Danforth Avenue. Here is what I would do. I would drive to the Warden Avenue subway station, park my car, and then take the train to the Royal York subway station at the other end of the line. I would then walk

along Bloor Street to the Bloor Viaduct, and then along Danforth Avenue back to the Warden Avenue subway station. It would take a whole day to complete this trip, but was it ever worth it. And what an incredible eye opener it was. Talk about tapping into other cultures to improve and enrich our lives! I learned so much about life and living by walking and talking my way through a vast array of cultures - Ukrainian, Indian, Italian, Somalian, Caribbean, Korean, British, Greek, Macedonian, and the like. Anyone who has walked this route will know exactly what I mean. It was even possible to experience a bit of The Rock - "Newfie culture" - at Danforth and Broadview before entering Greek culture at Chester to Pape.

And while we are talking about enjoying a variety of cultural experiences, what about Caravan for a cultural experience *par excellence*? While there are now many other ways to experience the different cultures of the world in Toronto compared to the days when Caravan first commenced operations in the nineteen seventies, who is not exceedingly grateful to Zena and Leon Kossar for creating this magnificent opportunity to experience a "smorgasbord of cultures" through their arts and crafts, people, and cuisine? For a small price, it was possible to purchase a passport that entitled the bearer to visit an array of ethnic pavilions in different parts of the city. They had everything: song, dance, drink, drama, poetry, music, story telling, food, craft objects, and people in their native costumes from virtually every culture and country in the world. A veritable feast and a real pioneer in confirming Toronto's multicultural roots and multiracial character.

While opportunities like this abound in Toronto today, most people do not venture too far beyond this. While they may feel comfortable eating other people's food, enjoying their songs, dances, craft objects and community celebrations, looking in their shops, and walking in their neighbourhoods, they feel uncomfortable digging deeper into their cultures. While there are many reasons for this - such as not knowing the language of the culture and feeling that they are intruding on someone else's life - this is very unfortunate. For what they will discover if they take a little time and trouble and demonstrate a bit of courage, imagination, and initiative is that there are numerous possibilities to address their problems and improve their lives.

I discovered this many years ago when I was experiencing some difficulty with my own culture and its preoccupation with materialism, money, and commercialism. Although I had grown up in a culture that was predominantly English-speaking and heavily oriented towards Great Britain and the United States, I was doing some work for Canada's Department of External Affairs at the time that brought me into contact with many French-speaking people closely associated with French and Quebec culture. I quickly learned that French-speaking people have a very different "take" on life. While they are not averse to materialism, money, and commercialism, they are much more concerned with "joie de vivre," and how to get the most out of life. Had it not been for this, I doubt very much that I would have found the insights that were needed to live a full, well-rounded, and balanced life - a life that has brought me an enormous amount of happiness and fulfillment over the years.

Many years later, I had a very different kind of experience with a much different culture, but one that has equally improved and enhanced my life. Here is how it came about.

I had long thought of taking art lessons to provide some relief from being a writer and creating a hobby that I could enjoy later in life. But I had always abandoned these thoughts as quickly as they occurred because I didn't have the money that was required to purchase a drafting table and the other equipment that was needed to achieve this.

One day, I was walking in our neighbourhood and happened to see a huge drafting table on a front lawn with a sign saying, "I'm yours for free if you can promise me a good home and look after me properly." I instantly thought, "this is the answer to my prayers!" I immediately went to a friend's house who had a large panel truck and asked him if he would help me move the drafting table into our basement. As luck would have it, I was walking in the Market Village Mall in Markham on the outskirts of Toronto a few days later and saw another sign saying, "Brush painting lessons provided here." I immediately signed up for these lessons, which were given by Mr. Lawrence Lui and the Federation of Chinese Canadians in Markham.

It wasn't long before I was learning a great deal about brush painting, including how to hold and load the brush, mix the colours and paints, and create landscapes. I also learned a great deal about many other aspects of Chinese culture and brush painting, such as why brush painting is such a revered art form in China - an art form intimately connected with nature and possessing a tradition stretching back over a thousand years. Small wonder the Chinese have a special affinity for birds, fish, horses, trees, flowers, mountains, water, rivers, the lotus and the bamboo, since these things figure prominently in Chinese brush paintings and many other aspects of Chinese culture.

I also learned a great deal about some of the most important natural and man-made sites in Chinese culture, including Suzhou, the garden city, Xian, the ancient capital, Hangzhou, the city of lakes, Guilin, the Venice of the Far East, and the world famous Huangshan Mountains. But more than anything else, I learned why calligraphy is considered the greatest art form and cultural resource in China. Just as it is impossible to understand Persian culture without understanding the crucial role carpets play in it, so it is impossible to understand Chinese culture without understanding the quintessential role calligraphy plays in it.

More recently, I have been delving into other aspects of Chinese culture. I was experiencing some health problems a year or so ago and wondered if there was anything in Chinese culture that might help me with these problems. I had long been aware that oriental cultures tend to place a high priority on achieving and maintaining good health - Yoga for instance - and have always been intrigued by the number of Chinese people doing Tai Chi, Qigong, and other forms of physical, recreational and spiritual activity in the parks in and around Toronto.

I had a chance to get involved in these activities directly when I decided to take up walking at the Markville Mall this winter. It wasn't long before I discovered that there was a group of people at the Mall, largely women, doing "Lee's Taiji" and "Yuanji Dance." Basically, this is a health system that incorporates various aspects of Tai Chi, Qigong, and other Chinese health, exercise, and movement systems. For about an hour each morning, the group does a variety of exercises set to the most exquisite oriental music imaginable. This is followed by several minutes of massaging the various parts of the body, particularly the hands, face, eyes, nose, hair, stomach, kidneys, and knees.

One morning I was watching the group going through its daily exercises when one of its members asked me to join in. I think she sensed I was intrigued by what I saw and was "ripe for the picking." So this is what I did. I joined the group and have now been doing the exercises for about six months. What an invigorating experience it has been! I am feeling much better - standing straighter, breathing deeper, relaxing more, and walking tall - and am learning a great deal about my body and its various dantian centres, acupuncture points, and the storage, retrieval and movement of chi - energy - in the body in the process. But the best part of all are the people. They are so helpful, cheerful, and full of life that I am enjoying my experiences with them immensely. I am feeling infused with their energy, vitality, and love of life, and am even learning a few words of Cantonese, Mandarin, and Hakka to boot.

And this is the point. There are countless ways to improve and enrich our lives through involvement in other cultures and the numerous insights, assets, and capabilities they have built up over the centuries. Whether it is through their arts, crafts, cuisine, health care systems, literature, religions, languages, or ways of life, the various cultures of the world are capable of producing enormous benefits for us in ways we can scarcely imagine. And there are always people in these cultures - warm, sensitive, compassionate and caring people - who are anxious to welcome us into their cultures and assist us in broadening and deepening our knowledge and understanding of them.

Viewed from this perspective, Gandhi was surely right. Allowing the cultures of all lands to be blown about one's house as freely as possible opens up a vast panorama of possibilities to solve our problems and enrich our lives. And refusing to be blown off our feet by any culture prevents us from becoming short-sighted, narrow-minded, and carrying things to extremes. And what better place to do all this than in a city like Toronto, with its incredible mixture of diverse cultures and people and numerous cultural resources and capabilities.

This paper was written in 2006 - World Culture Project

IGCAT's mission is to empower and facility local communities to realise the potential of their distinct food, culture, arts and sustainable tourism and local resources.

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